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Srivishagan Vijayaragunathan

Thalpage Rasanthi

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## **An Insight to Women in Construction for Fostering Female Careers in Sri Lankan Construction Industry**

By Srivishagan Vijayaragunathan<sup>1</sup> and Thalpage Rasanthi<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

The construction industry is one of the largest sectors in Sri Lanka. Since, there is rapid growth of new technologies in today's global market, there is a need to foster human skills and knowledge related to employment in the sector. However, the Sri Lankan construction industry is facing technical and managerial skill shortages as well as worker capacity issues. Further, the industry is facing industrial issues such as delivering timely project completion, within budget and for desired quality. 'Women in construction' has been a topic of concern by many nations, for many years. Given the rapid growth and demand in the construction sector, there has been an incremental increase in the participation of women in construction but this is still relatively minor when compared with other fields such as manufacturing, administration or academic. According to Sri Lankan vocational education reports, though there are around 40 percent of students enrolled in local technical colleges are female, over 70 percent of them are applying for nontechnical and culturally accepted feminine courses such as home science, dressmaking, beauty culture and secretarial courses. Additionally, since gender differentiation occurs in local industries, women are significantly underrepresented in technical fields such as construction and there are observable social barriers to entry including the physical demands of construction work, male construction worker behavior and social stereotyping of construction as a male occupation. This paper examines the reasons for the limited participation rate of females in the construction sector.

*Keywords:* Construction, Sri Lanka, Women, Reasons, Guidelines, Professionals

### **Introduction**

21<sup>st</sup> century women are represented in many occupations where male representation had dominated, these include law, medicine, accountancy, information technologies and most of the secretaries' positions. However, in the construction industry there is an easily observable disparity of female representation. On a global basis there is a shortage of skilled labor in the construction sector and this is also the case in Sri Lanka. Given the limited traditional male workers for the construction sector, there would appear to be an opportunity for women (CIOB, 2009).

Women represent approximately 57 percent of the 21 million individuals that comprise the population of Sri Lanka. 8.5 million people are economically active and of that number women represent 33.4 percent. Given the population values it is obvious that there is a large portion of the

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<sup>1</sup> Vijayaragunathan Srivishagan is a doctoral student in Management Science and is a Lecturer in the Civil Engineering Department at the University College of Matara in Sri Lanka. He can be reached at [srivisha87@gmail.com](mailto:srivisha87@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Rasanthi Thalpage is a Lecturer in Civil Engineering Department at the University College of Matara in Sri Lanka. She can be reached at [rasanthithalpage@gmail.com](mailto:rasanthithalpage@gmail.com).

population that is not economically active and within that the majority of the female population is not classified as economically active.

The Ministry of National Policies and Economic Affairs Report (2015) states census and statistics for workers in the construction sector by gender. Female representation in the Sri Lankan construction industry is approximately 8,549 of a total of 188,877 individuals employed in the sector.

Fostering female participation in the sector has some challenges including time of work, the location of work, gendered view of construction, sexual issues, family commitments as well as gender-specific physical and body related issues (CIOB, 2009).

Women face several barriers in the construction industry such as family commitments (having children and effect on promotion, achieving a good work-life balance), sexist attitudes towards Women (jokes, comments), lack of female role models, unattractive clothing (personal protection equipment, hard hats, steel capped boots), lack of career information at school age, recruitment practices (not getting same opportunities due to gender), lack of knowledge related to opportunities available in the construction industry, male dominated culture and income inequality between women and men.

In this research, addressing the issues faced by women in the construction sector is consistent with overcoming barriers for women and encourages and retains them in the industry. Barriers identified include flexible working hours, equality and diversity training (aimed at employers and employees), an increase in marketing and promotion of women already in construction, increase in placement and work experience opportunities available, more career information and promotion of the construction industry at a young age and finally, increased media coverage highlighting the issues in construction.

## **Women in Construction**

Globally the construction industry is the largest industrial employer with seven percent of all employment and 28 percent of overall industrial employment. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), construction work is almost exclusively male. (Powell et al, 2013).

Female participation is both limited and marginal as there are several factors that affect equal gender participation in engineering fields. From an entrepreneurial perspective women are not likely to engage in the construction sector. Women entrepreneurs opt out of construction given barriers such as social acceptance of employment, sexually stereotyping of the profession, their physical incapability for construction work, the working hours, exposures, injuries, hazards, sexual discrimination, and gender-based harassment. (Madikizela & Haupt, 2010).

Arguably, the limitation in female labor market participation in the construction sector is a societal loss. Ultimately society as a whole suffers due to the marginalized participation of one gender and women are, therefore, are essentially a wasted resource. However prevailing attitudes suggest change will not be easy because the male dominant culture in construction has created a barrier to women who fear isolation, discrimination and harassment (Reshma & Jayeshkumar, 2016).

Hence though today the construction industry is a fast growing industry equipped with lots of technical advancement and architectural development, and in need of continued rapid technological change, the industry is limited by its labor bias and institutional patterns of behavior. The hours of construction operations preclude women's equal participation given their household duties (Watts, 2012).

## Methodology

A research methodology can be identified in a systematic way that can be used to solve a problem (Rajasekar, Philominathan, & Chinnathambi, 2006). Research includes data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Creswell, 2008). Further, research approaches can be qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods.

As this research aims for fostering the female careers in construction industry it focuses on specific challenges faced by women and the identification of corresponding mitigation strategies. The methodology employed is quantitative.

## Data Collection and Analysis

This section describes the data collection and analysis procedure used to reach the research objectives. In this research, main aim is to identify the significant barriers to women in entering into the construction industry. A questionnaire survey was conducted with construction industry professionals in Sri Lanka. 100 surveys were distributed across professionals in employed in both the public and private sector. Only 54 responses were collected. Interestingly, all participants noted female participation favorably and appeared positive with respect to fostering female careers in Sri Lankan construction industry.

### *Research Questions: Barriers in the Construction Industry*

Several significant barriers were identified with respect to women and their participation in the Sri Lankan construction industry, such as family commitments, sexist attitudes towards women, lack of female role models, unattractive clothing, lack of carrier information at school age, recruitment practices, lack of knowledge over opportunities available in the construction industry, male-dominated culture and women receiving lower payment than male counterparts.

**Table 1: Significant Barriers: Insight into Limitations to Women in the Sri Lankan Construction Industry**

Barriers	Ext. Imp.	Very Imp.	Mod. Imp.	Slight Imp.	Not Imp.
Family commitments (having children and other responsibilities)	33%	56%	4%	4%	4%
Sexist attitudes towards women (Jokes, Comments)	56%	19%	19%	4%	4%
Lack of female role models	15%	41%	15%	22%	7%
Unattractive clothing: (PPE, hard hats, steel capped boots)	7%	4%	56%	15%	19%
Lack of carrier information at school age	11%	19%	4%	59%	7%

Recruitment practices (not getting same opportunities)	11%	33%	26%	11%	19%
Lack of knowledge over opportunities available in the construction industry	26%	15%	22%	30%	7%
Male dominated culture	7%	41%	19%	22%	11%
Women receiving lower pay than male counterparts	11%	11%	11%	11%	56%

The questionnaire used multiple choice rating criteria. Respondents were able to rate the significance of each barrier such as extremely important, very, moderate, slight important and not important. Table 1 provides the responses by criteria. Specific to family commitments 33 percent of all respondents answered extremely important and 56 percent of respondents noted family commitments as very important. The 89 percent in total reflects the most significant barrier for women entering in the construction industry. 75 percent of respondents noted having or perceiving sexist attitudes towards women (56 percent extremely important and 19 percent very important). 66 percent acknowledged a lack of female role models as a potential issue (15 percent extremely important and 41 percent very important). 48 percent admitted to the construction industry as being a male dominated culture (7 percent extremely important and 41 percent very important), With recruitment practices scoring 44 percent (11 percent extremely important and 33 percent very important), lack of knowledge over opportunities available in the construction industry at 41 percent (26 percent extremely important and 15 percent very important), and lack of carrier information at school age 30 percent (11 percent extremely important and 19 percent very important), there is significant potential for promoting more information on the construction sector as a potential recruiting aid. Interestingly wage disparity was not considered to be important, with only 22 percent of surveyed individuals (11 percent extremely important and 11 percent very important) noting that wage equality was either extremely or very important. There was no surprise that clothing did not factor that significantly given that construction attire is typically aligned to safety (Unattractive clothing 11 percent with 7 percent extremely important and 4 percent very important).

The results of the survey identify the three top barriers to female participation in the construction sector as being: family commitments, sexist attitudes towards women and lack of female role models. The results highlight areas that could be targeted through policy to increase female participation in construction.

## Conclusion

Women were found to be limited in representation in construction while also confronting many obstacles and barriers to entry into the sector. A range of interrelated structural and cultural factors defined the gender disparity. To encourage female participation in construction, they must be provided with support and encouragement for non-traditional choices at an early age. Women must be aggressively recruited into training programs with the aim of giving technical knowledge and experience. In this paper, significant barriers to women in construction were identified for

fostering female careers in Sri Lankan construction industry. This research revealed most significant barriers are family commitments and lack of female role models.

Additionally noted was the substantial disparity between female employment status, income and professional advancement within the sector compared with men. To resolve these issues and for more women to be included and retained in the construction industry, they need to be supported and properly trained through legal as well as social interventions so that associated social customs are also addressed. Thus, the solution for resolving parity and promoting gender equality in construction includes interventions by all components of the industry including NGOs, state and central governments, domestic and multinational construction companies, as well as national and global labour organizations.

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